

The Strategic Imperatives of Modi's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative

By Jagannath Panda

The concepts of 'strategic autonomy' and 'inclusiveness' have been core to India's Indo-Pacific policies. Without taking a defined position on the contested power politics in the Indo-Pacific, India has largely maintained cordial relations with most countries and stakeholders in the region. As a corollary to this, the rubric of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) advances India's maritime diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting India's desire to manage maritime security and governance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposition to establish the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) at the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) on November 4, 2019, primarily draws on this assertion.

Jagannath Panda,

Research Fellow and Center Coordinator at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, explains that "The rubric of Security and Growth for All in the Region advances India's maritime diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting India's desire to manage maritime security and governance in the Indian Ocean Region."

But what role could the IPOI play structurally in India's Indo-Pacific outlook? And importantly: does the initiative hold any relevance in the post-COVID-19 order? As a pre-Covid proposition, the IPOI was aimed at promoting a 'cooperative' and 'consultative' strategic forum of engagement, which naturally ensured a greater role for India in the Indo-Pacific. The proposal also affirmed its commitment to 'Sustainable Development Goal 14', in order to protect and secure the maritime domain, and advocated a 'truly open, inclusive and cooperative' global order. Undoubtedly, in the post-COVID era, the strategic imperatives for building such a 'cooperative' and 'consultative' framework assume greater significance than ever.

The coronavirus outbreak has highlighted the flaws of over-dependence of supply chains and economic networks on China – at present, large-scale production has been halted in almost all countries due to lack of resources, manpower and transportation facilities. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has already warned of a drop of 30-40 per cent in foreign direct investments and a total estimated \$2 trillion economic losses globally due to the pandemic. Such a scenario of global economic recession, amid competing national interests, certainly emphasizes the need for a framework such as the IPOI to generate revenues and boost economies.

With a prime focus on securing maritime boundaries, the IPOI stresses on seeking 'partnerships' that promote free trade and sustainable use of marine resources. It draws on three aspects of India's Indo-Pacific outlook: purposive partnerships, a pluralistic policy and power promotion. A purposive partnership with 'like-minded' countries is at the core of the IPOI. In Indian proposition, such partnerships must have three common goals in the IOR (where China is fast emerging as a dominant power), namely wealth generation, welfare promotion and (cooperative) win-win strategies – the three w's. Put simply, the partners must cooperate in creating wealth for developing Asian economies, as China is doing via the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; promote welfare in the littoral states via a democratic model of governance; and win by creating a rules-based order that promotes free trade. The partnership involving the United States, Japan, Australia including India, under the rubrics of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), could be strengthened around such goals.

The IPOI echoes India's plurilateral approach of engagement. It compliments Modi's keynote address at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, which underscored that India's Indo-Pacific approach was founded on ideas of 'pluralism, co-existence, openness and dialogue'. Being a multi-stakeholder and cooperative initiative, the

IPOI focuses not only on ASEAN centrality, but also on Indo-Pacific connectivity, sustainable infrastructure and economic cooperation leading to regional integration.

Such a plurilateral approach becomes even more significant given the security concerns in the region, arising from both the traditional and non-traditional security threats. The biggest and most pressing concern to the Indo-Pacific and Asia has been the increasingly assertive military-maritime posturing of China. Beijing's plan is based on dominance in trade through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, in the post-COVID period, China's soft-power promotion will surely take center stage; Beijing will make fresh attempts at rebuilding its relations with countries that are critical to the BRI. The focus will be on the IOR; the region is key to China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative with its thrust on creating infrastructure for Chinese ships and maritime trade. Such Chinese unilateral initiatives must be held accountable; and a forum like IPOI could be the perfect strategic platform to review, scrutinize and create awareness through debates and policy deliberations.

Much like the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States like the Infrastructure Transaction and Assistant Network and Blue Dot Network and Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, the IPOI is a multilateral regional initiative for like-minded nations. And if successfully implemented, it can address critical issues of growth and development in the Indo-Pacific, and particularly forge a concentrated dialogue with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the only major multilateral institution that exists in the IOR.

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For New Delhi, the IPOI assumes greater relevance for India to promote its power base ahead of the mounting Chinese presence in the IOR. New Delhi's involvement in Quad 2.0; military engagement in bilateral, trilateral and multilateral exercises like Australia-India Exercise and Malabar; and signing of agreements like Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement have enlarged India's military-maritime posturing in the region. In addition, national projects like Blue Economy Initiatives and involvement in sub-regional groupings like Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy strengthen India's maritime economic resolves. Even though India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, bilateral trade with countries like Japan, China, South Korea and Australia has been somewhat on the rise, or in any case have been steady. The IPOI, therefore, provides a basis for India to expand these networks across military and commercial domains, enabling its power promotion in the region.

Arguing for a cooperative system to advance the Oceans initiative, New Delhi aims to promote a culture of institutional engagement in the IOR that would promote India's power base and influence. India has been actively engaged in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the most well-known institutional institution in the IOR which has functioned much in isolation. The IPOI could establish greater structural linkages between IORA and other multilateral groupings or initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA), the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries.

Finally, with China's emerging capability as a blue water navy, the contest to control the Sea Lanes of Communication will continue being a defining aspect of power contestation. Non-traditional security threats such as drug trafficking, piracy and climate change will make this contest more intimidating. Thus, India's emergence as an important Indo-Pacific power is critical for the United States and its alliances. And the IPOI is integral to that equation.

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